

## **Gothic, comics and ghosts in the gutter**

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This paper will explore some of the connections between comics and the gothic. It will identify tropes of the literary gothic and discuss the ways in which these can be identified in the creative processes and production of today's comics, using examples taken from the 'Brit Invasion' of the American comics industry and linking these to the British gothic tradition.

It begins by establishing the relevance of the gothic to contemporary comics.

Absorption is seen thematically in comics' use of long-running titles that incorporate different writers and artists; and structurally in their nesting of story arcs, reprinting of old issues, and incorporation of varying artistic styles.

- Sandman
- Unwritten

Finally, the gothic dualism of the split subject and the Other informs the superhero figure (as an example of fragmented identity) and the role of the reader (as both interpreter and contributory author). – quick summary

The paper then argues that many points of comics narratology can be approached using gothic literary theory. These include the depiction of time as space, the mobility of visual and verbal perspective, and the active role of the comics reader.

The remainder of the paper discusses the active role of the comics reader using cryptomimetic theory. It defines the gutter as an encrypted space that can exist only retrospectively, in our 'backward-looking thoughts'; paying particular attention to the requirements of interpretation and filling the gutters.

The paper concludes that the gothic mode informs the structure, content, readership and cultural status of contemporary British-American comics.

## SLIDE 1 INTRO

It might seem that contemporary comics and the gothic tradition are completely unconnected. Gothic is a literary mode with marked historical and national genres such as the English Gothic, Pulp Gothic, American Gothic, Southern Gothic and so forth. The popularity and critical reception of Gothic has given it great canonical clout, and classic works from the likes of Mary Shelley, John Keats and Bram Stoker link Gothic firmly with Romantic literature and notions of individual genius and authorship.

By contrast British and American comic strips rose to popularity from newspapers and magazines in the late nineteenth century and, unlike the canonical and literary Gothic, comic books are often seen as a mass-market industry of disposable entertainment.

## SLIDE 2 EC

But horror and comics have a long and intertwined history. Gothic can also be found in American disposable pulp magazines such as *Weird Tales*. Its revivalist tendencies mean that gothic stories frequently retell old or traditional tales – far removed from our understanding of Romantic authorship. Gothic has also long been identified as containing a dual sense of play and fear, apparent in early parodic and reflexive works such as Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818), or the ghoulish humour of the later American Gothic (for example Edgar Allen Poe). The playful and subversive nature of the comics medium (with its emphasis on caricature and exaggeration) can be viewed similarly, and also summons gothic excess; and many comics genres such as the crime or horror comics shown here also recall the gothic literature of sensation in their subject matter and style. Conversely and more recently, comics have been reinvented as 'graphic novels' and have enjoyed a burst of critical attention and literary awards. Technological advances together with talented 'star creators' have resulted in the medium establishing a kind of canon of its own.

Gothic has all too often been reduced to a set of trappings (haunted castles, persecuted heroines, ghosts and demons and so forth). This paper hopes to go beyond the surface and instead consider the gothic as a mode of writing, with a sprawling reach, that has absorbed and subverted so many genres to date. Rather than look at horror comics, it will discuss the establishment of the DC Vertigo imprint as an example of gothic absorption, and extend this

argument to redefine the gutter as the crypt (using the work of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault) and discussing the role of the 'revenant' or ghostly reader.

### SLIDE 3 GOTHIC

As a mode of writing, Gothic absorbs other genres, for example romances and westerns are done in a gothic style. Thematically, it is characterised by a tendency towards inversion, parody, subversion and doubling. Some of its most memorable texts weave all three together. In addition, it can be structurally complicated. A key symbol is that of the crypt, which critics such as Jacques Derrida, Nicolas Abraham, Maria Torok and Jodey Castricano use to decode the complex signifiers of gothic language. The content of gothic texts is often symbolic, and the crypt (which guards a hidden secret) reflects this.

Multiple (and often contradictory) narratives are also common. Tales may have several 'layers' of embedded stories (as in *Frankenstein*), some of which may be hidden or a-chronological. Temporality is therefore also an issue – gothic settings may take place in an alterity – the near-past or not-so-distant future (steampunk fiction arguably combines both). Even if a linear temporal structure is used, multiple voices or an unreliable narrator may be used.

### SLIDE 4 WATCHMEN

Many of the eggs here focus on divided personality emphasised by their packaging. Link this briefly to the comic book superhero as an example of fragmented identity. For example, *Watchmen* (Moore and Dave Gibbons' 1986-7). Here the idea of 'masks' is a frequent motif in Moore's dialogue: for example the character Rorschach consistently refers to his mask as his "FACE" or "SKIN", saying that he "BECAME MYSELF" in wearing it (Moore 1987: V.11, V.18). But Moore defines the motif still further when, speaking of the superhero known as the Comedian, he writes "...HE WAS **DRUNK**. HAD HIS **MASK** OFF. THE GUY WAS **SCARED** OF SOMETHING..." (II.21). The link between not wearing a mask and showing fear elevates the mask motif to something metaphorical: a symbol of power. It is, quite literally "ALL THAT'S NECESSARY ... ALL I NEED" (X.9) to become a superhero. They represent internal power (as in Rorschach's 'face'), while simultaneously functioning as an external disguise, calling to mind the associated gothic themes of isolation and the internal vs external.

### **SLIDE 5 RAINIE**

In *Sandman* #20 ('Façade') Neil Gaiman continues these themes, reviving Element Girl, a 1960s DC superhero who can change her body into any substance. Gaiman picks up the character decades later as an agoraphobic who has been pensioned off and lives isolated in her apartment.

The comic is full of mask references: expressions like "PUT ON A BRAVE FACE" (Gaiman, 1991: IV.4) are used frequently and Element Girl's apartment is littered with her cast-off silicon masks. These seem devoid of all power as she uses them purely as a shield or disguise. By continuing to read the mask motif as representing both power and disguise, we can see Gaiman thematically exploring the end of a superhero life, where power is worthless and both mask and heroine have become hollow, useless shells.

### **SLIDE 6 SPIDEY**

These uses of the mask motif reveal the gothic notion of fragmented identity at the basis of the superhero genre. The superhero's reliance on multiple identities and alter egos not only represents the existence of such plural possibilities within an individual and the sustenance of the multiple by the postmodern, but can also be read as an example of constitutive otherness, where marginalised elements define the text and apparent unity is maintained only by processes of exclusion and opposition. In comics, the alter ego is often directly opposed to the superhero identity – as evidenced by the mild-mannered Clark Kent versus the powerful Superman; or the timid Peter Parker versus the brash Spiderman, and in this sense the two halves define each other. Understanding personality as constructed around flaws, as the antithesis of 'real' character, suggests a new approach to the superhero/alter ego divide, allowing us to understand these conflicting entities as part of a single psyche, embodied in one person, however tremulously. This view of personality as constructed from multiple, coexistent identities features in the psychoanalytic models of Freud, Adler and Jung and is applicable to the superhero motif, where neither 'Peter Parker' nor 'Spiderman' accurately reflects the 'whole', complete person.

### **SLIDE 7 SWAMP THING**

I'd like to turn now to the idea of absorption and rewriting as seen in both the gothic and comic books. Gothic absorption is variously defined by critics: Robert Hume (1969) notes that the popularity of early gothic meant that its 'trappings' were adopted by types of novel and Catherine Spooner (2004: 4) suggests that the Gothic novel is itself absorbed into a range of other genres. However, by conceiving Gothic as a mode (rather than a genre or set of trappings), David Punter reverses this understanding of absorption, allowing for other genres 'to be done in a gothic style' rather than adopting superficial trappings and symbols of the gothic. This atemporal and reciprocal concept of gothic absorption is apparent in comics, as I will show using *Swamp Thing*, *Sandman* and *The Unwritten*.

As we all know, the publishing practices of mainstream American comics rely upon processes of absorption and succession. As multiple writers and artists work on long-running superhero titles, the narrative strategy of 'retroactive continuity' is generally used to keep continuity consistent in long-running titles within the comics mainstream. However, the ways in which Vertigo uses absorption are more gothic. The imprint launched in 1993 with six flagship titles from the 1980s, all of which were reworkings of previous DC supernatural or horror titles (*Sandman*, *Swamp Thing*, *Hellblazer*, *Animal Man*, *Shade: The Changing Man* and *Doom Patrol*). Their new incarnations incorporated social concerns, surrealism, metafiction and mythology, and 5 of these titles were scripted by British authors. In this they followed Alan Moore's reworking of *Swamp Thing* in the early 1980s

Thatcherism and right-wing politics in Britain in the 1980s made the superhero a problematic figure, to be deflated and subverted, as in texts like *V for Vendetta*, *Miracleman* and *Watchmen*, and this is what sparked the headhunting of British talent that formed the basis of DC Vertigo. Chris Murray (2010: 37) cites Alan Moore's *The Saga of the Swamp Thing* #21 ('The Anatomy Lesson') as the key turning point, claiming it was 'unlike anything seen in mainstream American comics to that point' both in its strong authorial voice and the care and attention apparent in its crafting. Karen Berger (Executive Editor and Senior Vice President of DC Vertigo) agrees, commenting: 'There was really no going back after Alan did *Swamp Thing*...'

By way of brief history, the Swamp Thing, a man turned plant-creature, first appeared in the DC anthology series *House of Secrets* #92 (September 1971) in a one-off story. In 1972 he got his own title, which ran until 1976, and which established his 'origin story': the tale of Alec Holland, a scientist working out in the marshes on a regenerative formula for plants who was literally blown to bits when foreign agents bombed his laboratory. Holland, his formula and the surrounding swampland merged, creating the Swamp Thing. The series was revived in 1982 as *Saga of the Swamp Thing* and writer Alan Moore took over the scripting with issue 20.

### **SLIDE 8 SWAMP THING PAGES**

Moore's rewriting of *Swamp Thing* changed the original horror story into something more by incorporating mythology, social concerns, philosophy and one of the strangest love stories to appear in mainstream comics. The Swamp Thing himself was modelled on an earlier character called The Heap, but whereas both this original figure and the 1970s Swamp Thing remained freak individuals, Moore redefined his 1980s version as a 'plant elemental': a god-like being literally made of plant matter who can regenerate at will and 'grow' a body from any living matter, anywhere. Swamp Thing became QUOTE 'a plant that thought it was Alec Holland, a plant that was trying its level best to *be* Alec Holland', rather than a mutated human. In issues 33 and 47, Moore would go on to explain that Holland was the latest in a long line of plant elementals (thus absorbing the identities of forerunners such as Alec Olsen (the 1970s Swamp Thing) and pilot Albert Höllerer (the original identity of The Heap)).

### **SLIDE 9 CAIN AND ABEL**

Moore also brought in old DC characters Cain and Abel, hosts of horror comics *House of Mystery* and *House of Secrets* in the 1970s. He rewrote these characters to include biblical references (after killing his brother again as part of an endless cycle, Cain explains 'I'm being punished for being the first *predator*... and *he's* being punished for being the first *victim*' (Moore 1987e, 2.19.3-4)). He also absorbs the characters' industry background by entitling *Swamp Thing* #33 'Abandoned Houses' and places them in a dream setting (the issue details their appearance to Abby as she sleeps, where they offer her a mystery or a secret). The tale Abel then tells Abby is a reprint of some golden-age pages covering the origin tale of the

original Swamp Thing and introducing Moore's concept that Alex Holland is not the first plant elemental to walk the earth Moore uses Cain and Abel as a storytelling device: incorporating textual indicators (such as the shattering of a mirror into panels as Abby first begins to fall into her dream) to divide his framing pages from the golden-age story.

#### **SLIDE 10 SANDMAN CAIN AND ABEL**

Neil Gaiman's subsequent revival of these characters in *Sandman* also displays the same processes of absorption. Gaiman populates The Dreaming (where Morpheus, the Sandman himself, resides) with the librarian Lucien, the raven woman Eve, and the storytellers Cain and Abel. All of these characters hosted DC horror comics in the 1970s and Gaiman's use of the characters also references their previous publishing history, for example they are introduced in an issue entitled 'Imperfect Hosts'. He continues Moore's biblical references as Cain repeatedly kills Abel, and also positions the characters in The Dreaming as storytellers: thereby supporting and reinforcing Moore's use of them as figures in Abby's dream and implying the original 1970s comics were also told from The Dreaming. In this way *Sandman* overwrites and subsumes not only the original *House of Secrets* and *House of Mystery* anthologies but also Moore's reinterpretation of the characters. Moore's absorption of these 1970s horror characters is in turn absorbed by Gaiman's adoption of his characters in the 1990s.

#### **SLIDE 11 CAIN AND ABEL ALL**

This process explicitly problematises notions of 'the book' and 'the *oeuvre*', as Michel Foucault identifies. For example, does John Constantine fall under Moore's *oeuvre* or Jamie Delano's? Moore invented the character, but never worked on *Hellblazer*, where John grew to maturity. Do Cain and Abel belong to the writers who worked on the 1970s DC anthologies? Or has Moore's rewriting now absorbed them into his *oeuvre*? Are the reprinted golden-age pages that are included in *Saga of the Swamp Thing* #33 properly part of that book, or do they remain part of the *House of Secrets* #92, particularly if we consider that their meaning has been altered by being absorbed into Moore's story? The reader's interpretation of this is dependent on their knowledge and experience and is thus variable, enacting the processes of the archive.

Absorption within the Vertigo universe is therefore bi-directional and a-temporal: reminiscent of the gothic mode. In his introduction to *Gothic Fiction*, Peter Otto (2013) comments that 'Gothic texts seem to be engaged in a long, unfinished conversation with each other and with other texts and genres; or, alternatively, Gothic seems to be a labyrinth in which texts echo, plagiarise, but also recontextualise and transform their precursors and competitors.' The conversation between Moore and Gaiman is a great example of this.

## **SLIDE 12: UNWRITTEN**

More recently, *The Unwritten* (Mike Carey and Peter Gross, 2009-present) engages with not just literary fiction but its metafiction and legacy. If *Sandman* is 'a machine for telling stories', timeless in its 'endless' scope and mythological themes, then *The Unwritten* is a machine for reflecting upon them, tied firmly to the context and themes of the present day. Extratextual allusions to celebrity culture, fan hysteria, comics conventions ('Tommycon') and so forth sit alongside its incorporation of motifs and themes drawn from classic literature which create a metafiction that reflects on the nature and processes of the literary canon. Issue 17 was a 'choose your own adventure' story where readers were directed to make choices as to the paths the characters followed. The comic's innovation and use of intertextuality is contrasted with more derivative uses, for example as here, a page from a forged novel that in a single page steals from Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy ('Powder', 'emerald telescope', 'blade of subtlety'), George Lucas's *Star Wars* prequels ('meta-condrians') and Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* ('Wuff').

*The Unwritten* interrogates the underlying power that stories (as fictional creations that frequently supercede historical 'truth') have. As Steven Hall points out in his 'Introduction' to the third trade paperback:

'The world is made of stories. The world is driven by stories [...] History is a story. Society is a story. Countries are stories. Your plans are stories. Your desires are stories. Your own memories are stories – narratives selected, trimmed and packaged by the hidden machinery in your mind. Human beings are story engines. We have to be – to understand stories is to understand the world.'



(Hall in Carey 2011a: 3)

The boundaries between fact and fiction are problematised and interrogated over and over again; characters (generally children) define 'truth' as a subjective concept, for example Cosi, who says 'Sometimes... even if it's a game, it's *real*, too. Sometimes it's not up to you to *choose*.' (2010b) or the child Lizzie ('For-real-true is only true *now*. Story-true is true *forever*.' (2011b)) Mr Pullman has the ability to reduce 'real' things to letters that melt away (an echo here of Grant Morrison's *The Invisibles* where characters perceive words as real). Even the intertextual references that the book rests on are problematised by being depicted as multiple, for example the appearance of Frankenstein's monster in a section entitled 'Very Like James Whale', referencing the 1931 movie starring Boris Karloff. Pinnochio's perpetual repetition ('I want to be *real*! I want to be *real*!' (2011b)) seems significant here – but what is less certain is what 'real' actually means.

*The Unwritten* is a reflexive model of absorption that uses allegory and allusion to interrogate literary authenticity and the subjective nature of belief. It draws upon literary tradition and critical understanding in order to demonstrate the power of telling stories, *by telling stories*. On the one hand it is an intertextual anthology of different stories that use multiple literary references. On another it is a gothic debate about the power of narrator, character and reader that problematises the notion of a coherently bounded literary diegesis. It transgresses boundaries and breaks down borders not just between stories but between notions of 'real' and 'imaginary'.

### **SLIDE 13 FORM/INTRO**

Want to conclude by reflecting on the workings of the comics medium using gothic critical theory. I would suggest that holistic analysis of the comics medium should use three main gothic tropes (haunting, seeing and decomposition). The gothic notion of haunting can be used to discuss the layout and interactions of the comics page, paying particular attention to the manipulations of time and space and the use of echoes (of both format and content). Ideas of excess, embodiment and artifice can be applied to the mobile perspectives used to construct the comics storyworld; showing that a self-consciously inauthentic narrative is created in comics through an excess of perspective, for example when an extradiegetic (or

external) narrative voice is combined with an intradiegetic visual perspective (for example as embodied by a character in the story). Finally, and as I will discuss in more detail now, the active role of the comics reader in interpreting both the shown and unshown content of the page can be approached by redefining the gutter as the crypt: a closed-off space whose contents can only be realised through a process of temporal disruption; in the reader's 'backward-looking thoughts'. This interpretation recalls Michel Foucault's ideas about the archive (as a space reflecting a particular historical period and culture) and Derrida's thoughts about the crypt (as a place where the known and the unknown reside simultaneously).

By using processes of intertextuality and decoding, comics readers also become partial-authors: as the medium demands that the 'gaps' between panels are filled in order for the narrative to progress. The emergence of reader response theory in key texts from Louise Rosenblatt (1938) and Wolfgang Iser (1967) sparked a train of critical thought that stresses the importance of the reader, arguing that the text is little more than marks on a page (like a road map) and the story (or journey) cannot exist until it is experienced by a reader. In this way the reader becomes a contributory author: using their own assumptions and experiences to produce an individual story from the comics narrative, a process which exemplifies reader response theory. The text is literally an event created by the efforts of both reader and writer in collaboration, using the material product.

In 'The Statement and the Archive' Michel Foucault demonstrates that the statement is not a closed bearer of meaning but 'an incomplete, fragmented figure' (1972: 125). Description or analysis of a group of statements (in this instance, the text) does not 'uncover' their meaning or foundation but establishes it through what he names a 'positivity' that is a quality of the surrounding discourse(s). The positivity extends beyond individual *oeuvres*, books or texts and thus has unity. Meaning is thus produced with reference to general knowledge, positivity, and surrounding social discourses (128). Foucault names these systems of statements the 'archive' which is not the sum of all the texts and documents of a culture, but rather the reason for diversity within its competing texts and interpretations.

I propose to apply this concept to the use of the gutter in comics. One of the most idiosyncratic elements of comics (and sequential art more generally) is this space between panels. Scott McCloud famously identifies the involvement of the reader here using the dramatic (and gothic) example of an axe murder (1993, 68), arguing that through a process of closure they connect the two adjacent panels. However, later critics have engaged in more complicated temporal analysis. Thierry Groensteen (2007: 113) writes that 'the gutter (provisionally) cancels the already read panel in order to allow the next panel to exist in its own right, in terms of a complete and compact form' and is supported by other theorists including Randy Duncan, Matthew Smith (2009: 164) and Neil Cohn (2010: 135).

However, the gutter itself is (in aesthetic terms) nothing more than a blank border. Its 'space' is conceptual rather than actual. As such, and rather than viewing the reader activity here as a synthesis of two adjacent panels, I redefine the events of the gutter as more properly belonging to the Derridean crypt: a sealed space that is the 'interior' of each panel.

#### **SLIDE 15 CRYPT**

Jacques Derrida uses the metaphor of the crypt, as a sealed, secret space, to define the internal space in which a patient under psychoanalysis keeps his repressed, encrypted memories and fantasies. He defines it as 'a safe: *sealed, and thus internal to itself*' (1977: xiv), saying that its contents are known but never seen. Derrida draws on the physical properties and connotations of the literal crypt (sepulchre, tomb, grave) and also uses the word as a verb (to crypt: to manipulate a secret code). Derrida thus also names the crypt an 'artificial unconscious' as its contents are created as a cipher and written on its wall only through this process. It is a space within the self that codifies through fracture, holding its contents secret, as 'the living dead' (that is, repressed thoughts that may appear as dreams).

Jodey Castricano uses Derrida's ideas to claim that narrative is an encrypting process, and argues for a narratology focused on decoding, decomposition and the acknowledgement of multiple textual voices and meanings. This statement seems applicable to the gaps on the comics page, where the events of the gutter/crypt are not shown yet undeniably present in the diegesis. A process of 'crypting' takes place that realises the contents of the gutter/crypt only when the reader views the *next* panel. They can only deduce elements

such as character movements, temporal shifts and so forth by looking at the following events. Through this process they produce the content of the gutter ('crypting'). I thus define the gutter/crypt as the interior of a panel (whose shown content is its exterior). Since reader knowledge, discourse and positivity all structure their act of reading, the process is indeed, as McCloud claims, specific to each individual reader.

Iser argues that the 'blanks' in the text 'give[s] rise to the reader's projections' which must be constantly readjusted as he moves forward through the act of reading: 'the structured blanks of the text stimulate the process of ideation to be performed by the reader on terms set by the text' (1980: 167). 'The incorporation of the new requires a re-formation of the old' (159) and so the gutter/crypt is a 'blank' that can only be realised retrospectively. It is the interior of the following panel and the reader must move between each panel's outside and inside to identify what has gone before.

#### **SLIDE 16 PREACHER**

The gutter/crypt is most frequently the site of temporal exclusion, then, as the narrative proceeds from one moment to the next, or makes a leap across diegetic time. For example, in this example from *Preacher* the deaths of Jesse's congregation take place between panels: we proceed directly from a panel where his (unseen) congregation are commenting on his behaviour to one where they are already dead: depicted as skeletons with the flesh burnt off their bones (32-33). This is a dramatic example of what generally occurs in the gutter/crypt. The (exterior) image of burning corpses contains within its interior (the crypt) the moment of their inflammation, which remains unshown but nonetheless apparent. As Derrida says: 'The crypt is thus not a natural place [*lieu*], but the striking history of an artifice, an *architecture*, an artefact: of a place *comprehended* within another but rigorously separate from it, isolated from general space by partitions, an enclosure, an enclave.' (xiv)

As an interior to the artificial exterior of the panel (and thus an 'artificial unconscious') the panel directs interpretation by interpellating the reader (that is, addressing them in a certain way). We thus comprehend the events of the crypt within it, as past and unseen. However, the processes of Foucault's archive also operate here and allow multiple readings to co-exist, for example as readers bring different ideologies to bear. Here, this might

include such elements as the level of suffering experienced by the congregation, or the explanatory reasoning they attach to it (a religious reader, say, might find this scene more problematic than an atheist; or might assume divine intervention). The text's positivity (as an irreverent piece of pop culture) certainly limits the possible interpretations, as does the interpellation of the reader, since *Preacher's* narrative consistently debunks grand narratives such as religion. However, there are no formal limits in place and readers of a different persuasion, or from different culture, or with no knowledge of the comic's author function might have very different expectations of its events. Until further explanation is given by the comic, whatever interpretative strand the reader has decided upon will feed forward into their interpretation of subsequent gutters. The reading of the comic thereby becomes an enactment of the archive, with each new discovery leading to a revaluation of previous thought.

#### **SLIDE 17: BATMAN**

Roger Whitson (2006) uses Lacanian psychology to argue that comics situate unrepresentable events in the gutters, and the gutter/crypt can also be the site of spatial exclusion, for example of events too graphic to be shown on the page. Jim Aparo and Jim Starlin's *Death in the Family* (1988-89) famously (and controversially) shows the death of Jason Todd, the second Robin, who is beaten to death by the Joker with a crowbar. Rather than electing to have the blows take place between panels, Aparo and Starlin instead show the downstroke of the Joker's crowbar in each panel, with the blow disguised by an 'effect' indicating the impact and Robin's body excluded spatially from the panel.

#### **SLIDE 18: JUDY**

*Sandman* makes use of a similar device in issue #6 ('24 Hours'), which follows the tone of both the above examples as it deals with the torture and deaths of a group of people in a diner. The blurred motion lines indicate that we are shown Judy putting out her own eyes with kitchen skewers as part of the second panel in this sequence, but her eyes themselves are spatially excluded from the panel. The gutter/crypt here becomes black, making a further connection with her lack of sight. '24 Hours' frequently manipulates its backgrounds and gutters in this type of way: once Doctor Dee's 'spell' begins, these become filled with abstract images such as clocks, sheep and Dee himself.

The gutter/crypt is thus an 'absent space' that nonetheless has representational capability in terms of both space and time. As such it can be considered as an example of the 'negative capability' of the comics medium. It can also, in sophisticated examples, be used as both simultaneously: for example *Hellblazer* #3 (Delano et al 1988) brings both spatial and temporal exclusion together

### **SLIDE 19 HELLBLAZER**

John Constantine appears in a borderless panel that nonetheless contains a gutter on its right-hand side where the page ends, from which we hear the noise 'RAOOOWK' and the dialogue 'Oh you *beast*, you've drunk it *all!*' Constantine then discovers the body of a dead cat in the next panel. Here, the gutter/crypt has simultaneously operated as both a site of spatial exclusion (as the sounds accompanying its death and the killers' comments are shown within the panel) and temporal exclusion (as Constantine continues following the cat's killers before stumbling over its body in the next panel).

As such, 'not showing' is possible:

- (1) within the panel (for example where events are obscured by effects or emanata or other devices;
- (2) outside the panel's temporal scope (when the *moment* of an event is buried in the gutter/crypt); and
- (3) outside the panel's spatial scope (when the *location* of an event is buried in the gutter/crypt).

Multiple interpretations of unshown events exist, structured by Foucault's system of the archive, which relies upon:

- (1) the reader's knowledge;
- (2) the text's positivity; and
- (3) the surrounding discourse(s).

### **Conclusion / SLIDE 20 REFERENCES**

To summarise: the processes used by comics and their readers seem spectral and cryptographic in their nature. The medium itself relies upon the reader to deduce the

unseen content of the page which is hidden in the gutter/crypt: a sealed space that exists as the interior of each panel in both spatial and temporal terms. The reader is invited to occupy specific positions as their interpretative acts demonstrate the processes of Foucault's archive. The Vertigo comics in particular rely upon a-temporal absorption (that connects titles) and critique and transgression of strict boundaries, for example as regards genre. Writers such as Moore, Gaiman and Carey absorb previous titles into their work in order to reflect on the nature of literature, storytelling and authenticity. In this sense Vertigo is a heterotopia: a place where canonical literature, genre fiction, cinematic genres, children's literature and many more clash. That the imprint's style and approach has in turn been absorbed by the mainstream of comics further supports a view of comics as a gothic medium, where creators can collaborate and engage in intratextual, intertextual and extratextual dialogue with comics, art and literature.